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SUBJECT: OPERATION LIGHTNING THUNDER: SITUATION FROM DUNGU

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Goma poloff recently traveled to Dungu in Haut Uele with MONUC escorts to gather information related to Operation Lightning Thunder. All MONUC personnel remain garrisoned at the Dungu airstrip, which is well guarded by an unknown number of UPDF and FARDC battalions. No MONUC forces are stationed outside of Dungu. The head of OCHA in Dungu credited the FARDC with improving relations between MONUC and the community. The FARDC soldiers in the region enjoy the support of the local population, and have reportedly successfully explained to civilians MONUC's vital supporting role. Sources in Dungu and Goma credit the FARDC with deterring LRA attacks in villages where they deploy. They seldom deploy to the most vulnerable smaller villages, however, until after the LRA has struck. According to OCHA, residents want to be rid of the despised LRA and do not object to operations against them. However, there is a perception that the implementation of Operation Lightning Thunder was badly bungled. IDP's in Dungu have received adequate assistance, but residents and displaced in other less accessible areas (including Faradje and Doruma) are reportedly still in need of food. End Summary.

The Long Journey North

¶2. (SBU) Goma poloff, accompanied by MONUC Deputy Chief of Staff Colonel James Cunliffe and two other MONUC officers, recently traveled to Dungu. The long unpaved airstrip in Dungu can handle considerable traffic, and MONUC and other humanitarian agencies land up to ten flights a day. Visitors, once rare, have become more frequent. MONUC maintains a MI-24 and two MI-17 helicopters at Dungu and uses them to make frequent day trips to more remote villages such as Doruma. All MONUC personnel (two companies of Moroccan peacekeepers at present) are garrisoned at the airstrip, which is well guarded by an unknown number of UPDF and FARDC battalions. No MONUC forces are stationed outside of Dungu in Haut Uele.

Origins of Current Conflict

¶3. (SBU) In the extended village of Dungu, a 30-minute ride from the airstrip, poloff spoke with the head of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, who set up the OCHA office in Dungu in September 2007. MONUC engineers first arrived in June 2007 to begin construction of the airstrip, which was intended to support MONUC/FARDC's Operation Rudia to contain LRA elements resident in the Garamba National Park. OCHA Head of Office Dungu said the LRA largely remained in the park, but abducted several youths from nearby villages during 2007 and early 2008.

¶4. (SBU) On September 17, 2008 the LRA launched simultaneous attacks on 20 villages in Haut Uele. Several villages were burned and "dozens" of civilians were killed. Forty-eight youths were abducted from Kilewa and another 60 from Dubua (as heard). Thousands of villagers fled to Dungu, and some vented their anger at MONUC for, in their view, not protecting them adequately. A mob of

protestors attacked a MONUC Military Observation Post in the village of Dungu, burning their vehicle and pillaging the outpost. More IDP's arrived after LRA attacks in December and early 2009, eventually swelling the IDP population to the estimated current total of 160,000.

¶15. (SBU) OCHA Head of Office Dungu credited the FARDC with improving relations between MONUC and the Dungu community. The FARDC soldiers in the region, which include Republican Guard and Angolan-trained battalions, enjoy the support of the local population, and have explained well MONUC's vital supporting role. Poloff heard no reports of FARDC looting or rape, but he did not venture into what are approximately a dozen smaller villages around Dungu and Faradje where the FARDC has deployed small units of soldiers. OCHA and a number of UN offices and NGO's maintain contact with the FARDC force commander through a liaison officer, but OCHA reported it is possible to reach the commander on short notice even when the liaison officer is absent.

¶16. (SBU) Goma poloff noted no interaction between the Moroccan MONUC escort and local residents, who observed the UN Humvees with sullen expressions (Comment: Poor and/or distant relations with the locals is normal for MONUC forces, who do not speak the local language and have no public outreach programs. End comment). Communication may, however, improve soon; poloff spoke to a three-person MONUC MILOBS advance team, who said they would recommend that MILOBS be returned to the village of Dungu. According to OCHA, residents want to be rid of the despised LRA and do not object to operations against them, but believe the implementation of Operation Lightning Thunder was badly bungled.

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Current Security Situation -----

¶17. (SBU) Sources in Dungu and Goma credit the FARDC with deterring LRA attacks in villages where they deploy. They seldom deploy to the most vulnerable smaller villages, however, until after the LRA has struck. OCHA advocated wider deployment of MONUC troops in three key towns: Dungu, Doruma and Faradje, as villagers from outlying areas tend to flee to these areas when they perceive a threat from the LRA (Comment: MONUC opposes the concept of "safe haven" areas, and SRSG Doss stated that to employ wider protection services, MONUC needed to deploy the recently approved 3,000 additional peacekeepers. End comment).

¶18. (SBU) Several sources in Dungu and Goma state that many small villages have begun to organize self-defense units. An AP reporter in Dungu said he has heard that locals have begun to manufacture home-made guns, and he was able document primitive gun manufacturing in progress. Such self-defense units have reportedly successfully defended their villages from LRA attacks and the AP reporter provided specific and credible details of one such defense that led to many LRA deaths (although the precise numbers were unverified).

¶19. (SBU) While MONUC handles logistics through Dungu and the FARDC deploys to some vulnerable villages, the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) is reportedly tracking groups of LRA fighters in the forests. UPDF Commander Brigadier General Patrick Kankiriho told Cunliffe that UPDF pressure has caused the LRA to split into many small groups, some as small as two or three men. Other sources claim at least one larger group of LRA still occupies the vast Garamba National Park. Kankiriho has collected several recent media reports about LRA killings which followed the launch of Operation Lightning Thunder. He claimed (somewhat defensively) that the figure of 900 civilian deaths was exaggerated.

¶110. (SBU) Kankiriho said the UPDF would welcome a Joint Operations Center with MONUC and the FARDC to facilitate broader information sharing. MONUC will follow up aggressively on this. The UN will soon deploy a Protection Response Team to Dungu with representatives of the Political, Child Support, and Civil Affairs units. UNHCR and UNICEF are already present in Dungu.

¶111. (SBU) Contacts in Goma and Dungu reported no massacres in

recent days, but the LRA is still active. An FARDC patrol was reportedly "ambushed" approximately 16 kilometers south of Faradje on February 10. Six FARDC soldiers were wounded, two seriously. A FARDC source claimed they killed 11 of the LRA attackers, but this has not been verified. Additionally, a priest in Dungu told poloff that two youths were abducted (presumably by the LRA) 26 miles east of Dungu on February 1, and that there had been "problems" in Gilima (north of Dungu) within the past week.

¶12. (SBU) OCHA has a detailed map for conducting humanitarian missions outside of Dungu and reported the road north to the border with Sudan is generally safe, but assistance teams can only travel 12 kilometers to the east in safety. IDP's in Dungu have received adequate assistance, but residents and displaced in other less accessible areas (including Faradje and Doruma) are reportedly still in need of food.

Rescued Abductees

¶13. (SBU) UPDF forces provided MONUC officers access to four children who had been abducted by the LRA, then rescued by the UPDF. MONUC officers estimated that the youths were between 8 and 18 years of age, and severely traumatized, with the "thousand yard stare" of victims of extreme violence. Only one was willing to talk about his experiences, saying that he had seen "bad things everywhere." Two of the abductees were from Sudan and two from DRC.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) This report tracks with information from several other sources, including humanitarian organizations, which described the FARDC (and Republican Guard) as well-disciplined. As for MONUC, its role is clearly limited for the moment and is unlikely to increase, absent a significant infusion of forces. The GDRC, for its part, would like for the UPDF to exit Congolese territory expeditiously for political reasons, but this operation continues to attract far less attention (positive or negative) than do more pressing problems in the Kivus.

GARVELINK